

Viceroid

by NetRaptor

Category: Sonic the Hedgehog

Genre: Adventure

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2000-06-18 09:00:00

Updated: 2000-06-18 09:00:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 20:36:51

Rating: K

Chapters: 1

Words: 14,454

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Summary: A short sequel to True Colors, with a heavy tribute to Terbium Moon. Something is spiriting away the villagers ... something evil ...

Viceroid

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Viceroid

Terbium Moon

II

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By K. M.  
Hollar

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Author's note: This is an intermission story between True Colors and The Epic Adventure. Some plot threads do not make sense because reading True Colors beforehand is necessary. Others will be followed through later, in The Epic

Adventure.

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## Prologue

It was dark--very, very dark--in the heart of what used to be Robotropolis, for there were no lights for miles, and a thick cloudbank obscured the moon and stars. The only sound was the whispering of the wind, and perhaps a pebble falling here or there. There were certainly no LIVING things in the mountains of debris. Even when the city was intact, it was not meant to shelter anything but robots.

Or was it?

A sound like a faint creaking grunt disturbed the brooding silence. In the darkness, a large cement slab lifted, lurched, lifted higher. In the blackness beneath it something white glinted, and a putrid odor seeped into the air. Another sound, this time very much like a human grunt, and the slab rose, cracked and fell away from the hole. Something hidden inside it stirred. Again, something caught what little light there was.

It emerged from the hole like a pupa from a cocoon, for that was nearly what it was. It slithered away from the hole and stopped. Slowly, gradually, it filled out and began to throb, faster and faster, in and out, in and out. Very softly, it spoke into the warm summer air: "First--to feed--and then--" Its voice sounded as if it were speaking under water, or had bronchitis. After a few moments, the pulsing monster moved off into the piles of rubble. It did not return.

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## Chapter 1: Disappearances

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The sun was setting as the crew knocked off work for the day. The air was hot and foul with the reek that continued to rise from Robotropolis's rubble. The chunks of cement (foundations, walls, etc.) that littered the ground for miles radiated summer heat like a stove. Spikes of rusted rebar protruded from them like malicious fangs. There were also metal pipes, crumpled silos and wrecked machinery mixed among it all. It was like the world's largest junkyard.

The crew of fifty Mobians and their tractors and trucks were dwarfed by the enormity of it all. But they were optimistic. On a map, the city had been divided into squares, and ten of them had been filled with red--acres of cleared terrain.

"That's almost a whole 'nother acre," Sonic remarked, looking over the shoulder of the Riverbase foreman, a beaver with a plastic helmet. (Everyone on the crew wore helmets, including Sonic.)

The beaver looked up at the hedgehog and flashed a tired smile. "It was shallow here, I think. Wait 'til tomorrow--we have to dig out an old SWAT-bot factory."

Sonic threw up his hands. "Heck! We'll never get done. Can I use the jackhammer again tomorrow?"

"No way!" came a reply from behind him. "\_I\_ get to use it."

The blue hedgehog turned to see a violet hedgehog standing there, hands on her hips. She wore ragged, dirty bluejeans and a faded red T-shirt. Her face was streaked with dirt and sweat that had dripped from under her hardhat, but she looked determined.

"Yeah right, 'Rena," Sonic smirked, looking every inch the condescending older brother. "You only used it once and the rattling made you sick. Nope, the jackhammer is for cool guys like me."

"Yeah, like you're so cool," she replied, eyes narrowed, pretending she hated his guts. He knew she didn't mind. She had been ready to throw up after fifteen minutes, but it was still fun to watch the cement crack and split to pieces under the assault.

A hand touched the young hedgehog's shoulder. She turned and looked up into the long, narrow face of a velociraptor. The creature was much taller than she, and against its' sides were folded a pair of great golden feathery wings.

"Hi Slasher," said Serena. "Whatcha doin'?"

"I was gonna head back to Knothole to make supper arrangements," Slasher replied, her sharp teeth showing a little as she spoke. "You want to come?"

Serena considered, gazing around the demolition site. "No," she said at last, "I think I'll stay here with Sonie."

From across the rubble, Sonic yelled in embarrassment, "Don't call me that!"

Slasher chuckled. "Okay then. I'm outta here." She turned and leaped into the sky. Her wings unfurled and beat the air, fanning Serena's hair. In a moment the raptor was high in the sky and vanishing in the direction of the forest rim.

"Doesn't that thing creep you out?" a voice asked from behind Serena.

She turned. Nearby stood a black mink, his fur sleek and shiny over his muscles. He was as dusty and sweaty as the rest of them, if not more; he drove the bulldozer.

"Heck no!" Serena exclaimed, straightening up and frowning. "There's nothing wrong with Slasher. She's cool."

The mink folded his arms and gazed after the winged shape in the sky. "I donno. They say raptors can't be trusted ..."

"Cut it out, Martin. She's saved my life in more ways than one. Just

ask Sonic."

He held up both hands to calm her growing ferocity. "Okay, okay, I believe you. No offense. She just gives me the willies is all."

"You ever talked to her?"

"Not directly, no."

"You ought to."

"Maybe later."

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But when the crew made it back to Knothole, Slasher was not there. Sally affirmed that she had not been there since that morning. "You mean she never got here?" Sonic asked, frowning.

The brown squirrel shrugged and brushed her long forelock out of her eyes. "You know Slash. Maybe she took a detour to hunt or something."

"I DO know Slash," Sonic disagreed, "and she would have come back here first. She was gonna set up dinner. Something must have happened."

"Like what?" Sally asked, folding her arms and lifting her eyebrows. "All the SWAT-bots are deactivated, Mecha Sonic and Robo Knux are off in South Mobius and Dr. Robotnik is hiding. She can handle anything else, and probably them, too. Don't worry about her, Sonic. She's just late." She gave his hand a comforting squeeze, then pushed him a step. "Get lost. I need to feed you guys." She walked away a few steps, then called over her shoulder, "Oh yeah, Tails wanted to show you something."

Sonic gazed after her as she trotted away, eyebrows furrowed in worry. It just wasn't like Slasher to break her word. Maybe she had gotten sidetracked like Sally thought. Well, he would ask her when she returned. In the meantime, he would see what Tails wanted.

He found the young fox in the junkyard behind Rotor's shop (stacked with the latest finds from Robotropolis), hidden behind the wreck of some gutted vehicle. "Where are ya, lil' bro?" Sonic called, looking over the fence at the tangle with a tinge of disgust. (What was the use of transporting all this to Knothole? Robotropolis had enough to spare!)

The fox's orange head popped up and he waved a screwdriver. "Here, Sonic! C'mon and see what Rotor found for me!"

Sonic located the gate, but it was buried under five feet of junk, so he vaulted over the fence. It was not until he had picked his way to Tails's side that he saw it.

Stashed in the corner was the long, sleek body of a 15-foot plane, one-seated. "Look," Tails exclaimed, stepping on the attached wing and tugging at a nameless strip of metal beside it. "This is the top wing. We found it!"

It took a moment for this to register in the hedgehog's head. "Oh, you mean it's a biplane?"

"Yeah, but not JUST a biplane," Tails replied, letting go the wing and jumping down, eyes alight. "I think it's the old Tornado!"

"Aw, c'mon," Sonic said, shaking his head. "My plane didn't look like that."

"Yuh-huh!" Tails interjected. "Remember the body job we gave it right before the In--you know, we forgot everything? We remodeled it so the jets wouldn't rip it apart, remember?"

Yes, Sonic remembered. If this was his old plane--

"But how did it end up in the junkyard?"

"It vanished, remember?"

True, it had. "But's it's not red!" Sonic protested, running a hand along the rusted fuselage. "It's silver."

"It WAS red," Tails said with a grin. He walked up to the plane's side and slashed at it with his screwdriver. The silver paint chipped away, revealing a crimson coat beneath. Tails would have chipped off more, but Sonic grabbed his wrist. "Don't! You'll dent it!" His eyes glinted with the pride of ownership, then a deep remorse as he looked at the rusted engine, the ransacked cockpit, the broken upper-wing. "Looks like it's rotted out. Can we fix it?"

Tails nodded and knelt beside the exposed engine. He banged his screwdriver against it, knocking off a few flakes of rust. "I think so. Rotor said he's help me. You remember how it's put together?"

"I donno." Sonic knelt beside him and peered into the engine housing. "It's been a long time. We oughta get Knuckles out here. He hot-wired it once, remember?"

"Slasher, too," Tails added, sticking his head into the plane's side. "I mean, we ought to show this to her, not because she hotwired it. Can you call her? I'd love to show her this."

"Um ... Slasher isn't here," Sonic replied, thinking uneasily of Sally's news. "But I'll call her in as soon as she gets back."

Slasher did not return.

The sun set and everyone went to bed, but the velociraptor was still missing. Sonic's worry spread to Tails and Sally. "This evening after work," Sonic told them, "I'm going for a hike."

He did, too, but he was too tired to go very far. He returned at dusk, more concerned than ever. "Sal," he told the squirrel privately before heading to his hut, "I blew my whistle and she didn't come. Something's wrong."

Four more days slipped by. On Sunday the work crew remained in

Knothole for a well-deserved rest. Sonic took a scanner, infra-red goggles and Tails, and spent the day in the woods. They returned that evening discouraged and tired; Slasher was nowhere within ten miles of Knothole, dead or alive.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday ... the days counted down. 9 days already? Something had happened to her--a freak accident, maybe--

Saturday. Sonic got up before dawn and went for a walk. Slasher was gone. It weighed heavily on his spirits. What had happened? What COULD have happened? It was nearly impossible to kill her--

He rounded a bend in the trail and and found her.

The big raptor lay on the trail like a wet sack, her limbs crumpled, wings limp and drooping. Her neck was stretched out weakly, jaws slightly parted, eyes glazed. She appeared for all the world to be dead.

Sonic dashed to her and knelt beside her. "Slash!" he gasped, pulling her head into his lap. To his infinite relief the green eye blinked and looked up at him. "Slash!" he exclaimed, "what happened to you? Where have you been?"

The raptor's jaws worked, but no sound came out. Sonic's eyes traced down her body in disbelief. Every rib in her body was showing, her legs litter more than shrivelled muscle and bone. Her wings were dull and grey, as if all the color had been drained from them. Her eyes were sunken into their sockets. She appeared to have been under extreme starvation for a long period of time ... but it had only been a week. "Oh Slash," Sonic moaned softly. A sob caught in his throat; Slasher was closer to death than he had ever seen her. He probably would have sat there with her all day if she hadn't have whispered, "Go get help!"

\* \* \*

Three hours later, Slasher was in the medical hut eating everything she could get her claws on. That was all that was wrong with her--lots of food and rest would see her back on her feet. The odd thing was that she wanted salads and vegetables more than anything else.

"It's really weird for a carnivore," Sally told Sonic. He had stopped her on her way to the medical hut with a head of lettuce and celery in her arms. "The strange thing is how fast she's regaining weight. You ought to come see her."

"I think I will," Sonic agreed.

They opened the door and walked in. Slasher was lying curled on the bed like a giant lizard, head up. "Green food, I crave sustenance," she said, reaching for the lettuce. Sally handed it to her, and the raptor fell to immediately. Sonic stared at her. She had gained flesh since he had found her--already she had the energy to move and speak, and her green eyes were clear and alert.

"Slash," he ventured, "what happened to you?"

She looked at him with one eye, chewing. "My strength was sucked out

of me."

"YOU? By WHAT?"

"A giant waterballoon."

Sonic looked at Sally, then back at the great raptor. "Uh ... do you know what you're saying?"

"Yes," Slasher replied evenly. "It looked like a waterballoon. It's the only way to describe it."

"How did it get you?"

Slasher shook her head. "I don't know. One minute I was flying, and the next ... well ... I was INSIDE it. It drained me and spat me out on the path."

"Gross."

Silence a moment, broken only by the rich crunching of the celery. Sally volunteered, "Was it a robot?"

"I don't know," Slasher said with a slight shudder. "It didn't seem like one, but you never know."

"How big was it?"

"I never saw the outside of it. It was big enough for me to ride around in, but I was asleep most of the time."

"Do you think it poses a threat?" Sally asked, eyebrows coming together in a worried frown.

Slasher gazed at the squirrel. "Sal, If I was no match for it, what makes you think the village is?"

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Hundreds and hundreds of miles to the south, a human with a large mustache sat in front of a computer, toying with who knows what. The room about him was crammed with computer equipment, screens and a large radio. Seated on a wooden crate at the human's elbow was an iron-blue robot, red eyes fixed intently on the radio. One silver and yellow hand was turning the dial first one way, then the other. A wire fed out of the robot's head into the headphone jack. The only sound was the soft, high-frequency whine of electronic equipment.

Suddenly the robot said, "Doctor, I am receiving a transmission."

The human didn't stir. "What is it this time? Another ad for skin care products?"

"No sir." The robot yanked his wire out of the radio and adjusted the volume. "It's coming from the Great Forest."

At last Robotnik graced Metal Sonic with his attention. "Yes? Some phone call from Sally to one of her friends?" His robotized hand

clenched spasmodically in a brief expression of hatred. Any mention of his former home turf set him on edge.

"Not this time," Mecha replied. "I do not know what it is. Listen."

Over the speaker in the radio came a strange garbled voice. "V-one calling Dr. Robotnik. V-one calling Dr. Robotnik. Am I coming in clear?" A wheezing, gargling chuckle. "Of course I am. Doctor, I wanted to let you know that I am alive. I plan to destroy the Freedom Fighters, the rest of the world ... and last of all, you. You cannot hide from the Viceroid." Another sickening sound of amusement. "Have a nice day."

The transmission ended.

Mecha's red crescents focused on Robotnik's face with the closest expression to worry he had. "Who was it, sir?"

Robotnik shrugged and turned back to his work. "Probably just some trick of the Freedom Fighters'. Ignore it."

But for a long while afterward, the robot sifted through radio stations, looking for that one voice and not finding it. Garbled as it was, he had recognized the voice.

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Chapter 2: Chewed up and spit out

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Things sailed smoothly for several weeks. Slasher recovered and resumed work, but with one difference; she always carried a communicator and a tracking device. She had no intention of being taken unawares by whatever it was.

Sonic was given a week off from the demolition crew. Bored with how long it took the jackhammer to tear up large quantities of cement, he had activated the super emeralds in his belt to become Hyper Sonic and proceeded to level everything within half a mile, including tractors and other equipment. The jackhammer finally shorted out from the prolonged powersurge of being in Sonic's glowing hands, and Sonic was given a vacation while the work crew recovered.

Always the one to make the best of things, Sonic used this as an excuse to go see Knuckles on the Floating Island. While there, he happened to mention, as a joke, that it would be a bummer if Sonic were to switch sides and sell Knux out to Robotnik. Knuckles seemed to laugh it off, but as the week wore on, the echidna became strangely withdrawn and deliberately avoided his friend. Sonic didn't know why, and left the island at the end of the week feeling vaguely as if he were not wanted.

Sonic resumed work with the others, as usual. Aside from a few jokes about weapons in the hands of hyperactive hedgehogs, he was treated



as if he had never left.

It was not until noon that it was noticed that Martin, the mink who normally drove the tractor, was absent. As he had been there that morning, no one paid much attention, figuring he had hiked back to the village to eat.

But that evening it was discovered that he had been missing all day.

Sonic and Sally immediately jumped to the conclusion that he had been attacked by Slasher's monster, but the big raptor calmed them by saying, "Don't be so hasty. If he's still missing by tomorrow morning, we'll look for him. If he's gone all day tomorrow, we can assume the worst."

There was good news and bad news the next morning. The good news was that Martin had returned. The bad news was that he had all the same signs of starvation Slasher had.

By the time visitors were admitted the worst was over and the mink was consuming mass quantities of vegetables.

Sonic exited the medical hut and stood for a moment, leaning against the wall, getting a grip on himself. Martin had not remembered anything but waking up, exhausted, on the path leading into Knothole ... the same one Slasher had appeared on. The hedgehog ran a hand through his indigo spines. What was it--an alien abduction? Why did no one see or hear the thing, close as it was to the village?

A touch on his shoulder. He nearly jumped out of his skin and whirled. There stood his older brother, Spark. The green hedgehog smiled slightly. "A bit high-strung, are we?"

Sonic sighed and relaxed. "You scared me."

Spark leaned against the wall of the hut beside him. His dark eyes were accented by the black fur around his face. He wore a scarlet headband with a small black stone set in it. His only other noticeable feature was that his left arm glittered a cold silver. It was bio-mechanical, implanted after a very bad accident had damaged that arm beyond repair. He ran this hand, fingers tipped with metal claws, through his long forelock and said, "Creepy, ain't it?"

Sonic nodded. "Very. Martin's eating all the same stuff Slash did. Acts like he was starved." He sideeyed his brother. "You seen anything suspicious?"

Spark shook his head. "Wish I could say I had. Maybe we could hang around the south trail and see if it comes by."

"Naw," Sonic said. "It might get US. Not a bad idea, though."

"We don't even know what IT is," Spark remarked, gazing aimlessly across the village.

Sonic turned and walked down the row of huts, on a whim, to visit Tails and the Tornado. Spark tagged along at his elbow. The two hopped the fence and picked their way among the stacks of useful junk

to the biplane and the figure crouched beside it. Someone was with Tails at the moment, however, and it was not Rotor. Sonic stopped and stared, partly surprised and partly jealous, for kneeling beside the fox was the purple porcupine, Spike. Spike had once been Sonic's arch-rival, but the two had made friends--sort of. They still tended to clash.

"Hey, Spike," Sonic said, walking forward. He felt Spark touch his elbow, a signal to keep cool.

Spike and Tails looked up. "Hi, guys," they said simultaneously. Spike stood and said defensively, "I just dropped by to say hi to Tails."

"Okay," Sonic replied, raising one eyebrow. "Nothing wrong with that. How's it going, Tails?"

The fox smiled and saluted with a wrench. "Not bad at all! Spike was helping me reach a few rusty spots I couldn't get. I'll bet this ol' plane'll be running like old times before long!"

Sonic knelt and looked around inside the engine himself, slightly peeved at Spike for spending time with Tails when he could have done it himself. To his surprise, large chunks of rust had been sanded off, and new parts gleamed in the darkness. "No kidding!" he exclaimed, pulling back and standing up. "You're amazing, Tails."

The fox grinned sheepishly and kicked at the grass. "Thanks."

Sonic looked at his watch. "I gotta go now, kiddo. Stay cool."

"Oh, I will. See ya, Sonic!"

Sonic and Spark departed for work shortly afterward. Sonic looked around sharply for Spike, but the porcupine had already left. "I wish HE'D get kidnapped," Sonic muttered.

The day went uneventfully; another acre was cleared. Sonic and Spark took turns with a spare jackhammer, and all day long dust rose, machinery rumbled and beeped, and workers shouted.

That night, someone else vanished--a stranger from the work crew--and was not missed until the next morning. He, too, turned up later, toward evening, but so badly starved it was doubtful he would live. He died that night.

Someone vanished and returned for the next four days, all in various stages of starvation. Some recovered, and a few did not. Something HAD to be done.

Sonic could not bring himself to sit in a tree all night with Spark and watch for the beast, and so suggested the sensible idea of leaving Nicole to film the area. Sally agreed readily, relieved that the two were not going to risk their lives trying to snare the thing. Nicole was hidden in the crotch of a tree, activated and left for the night.

The next morning, the two hedgehogs burst into Sally's hut, waving the computer in the air, so excited they could hardly speak. Sally,

annoyed but interested, grabbed her bathrobe (she had still been in bed), ran a comb through her hair and sat down at a table with Nicole before her.

"Holofilm activated, Sally."

A rectangular disk was projected into the air with a shot of the empty trail and surrounding trees. Nothing happened for several minutes.

"Can we hurry this along?" Sonic asked, tapping a foot impatiently.

"Nicole, scan forward to first documented activity," Sally commanded, as eager as Sonic to see what was on the tape.

"Affirmative," the computer replied. The image was set on fast-forward, flickering slightly. It grew dark, and automatic image enhancement came on, shading everything in bright green. "First documented activity," Nicole announced.

The flickering ceased, and the bushes on the right stirred as if something were passing through them. A large object, outlined by the movements of the foliage, paused and waited, evidently watching. There was a faint, continuous movement, like breathing. Suddenly, in one place the leaves parted for an instant, and something white glinted. Then it pulled back, the bushes rustled, and it was gone.

"Run it back," Spark exclaimed. "Sal, what was that white thing?"

"I don't know." The squirrel's fingers clicked on the keyboard. "Nicole, display frame 862, enhance." The shot came up and zoomed in. A green line traced over it as the computer analyzed the shape. After a moment another screen came up with Nicole's findings. "Object unknown. Light reflective = 100%. Suggestions: Tin, Ivory, Steel. Known matches: Many of Dr. Robotnik's robots."

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Metal Sonic stared out the window of the warehouse, chin in one hand and fingers drumming on the table. He was oblivious to his surroundings. All his systems were turned inward, analyzing the voice from the strange radio transmission. In other words, he was deep in thought.

Robotnik was sitting at the computers across the room, rendering models and diagrams of a machine--probably a robot. He was a genius at work of that sort and loved it. His skills, he thought smugly, had improved since he had designed the first badniks and SWAT-bots. This mechanical creature was vastly superior to his previous creations ... with only a few exceptions.

"Mecha," the doctor called, leaning back in his chair and fingering his mustache. "Come here a moment." The robot appeared to ignore him and continued drumming his fingers on the table he was seated at. Ivo growled deep in his throat and climbed to his feet, his chair creaking in relief. He strode across the room and tapped Metal Sonic on the shoulder. The robot turned, his red eyes flickering on as his

outward sensors reactivated. "Yes sir?" Robotnik beckoned to him, and Mecha rose obediently and followed him.

Mecha's mental hardware had been upgraded to an experimental computer that operated on a chemical level. This meant that the robot carried a super-computer the size of an orange in his hull. His personality had not been affected, but suddenly he was incredibly intelligent. He solved multi-page calculus problems for amusement and simulated complex combat exercises outdoors while his master was asleep. The downside was that he often spent time thinking about things Robotnik did not wish him to, such as the radio transmission.

He now stood and swept Robotnik's drawings with his video sensors. After a moment he asked, "What will be the function of this unit?"

"To replace the wreck SWAT-bots," Robotnik replied. "Military bots. Hundred of them."

"You will need a special facility for construction," Mecha replied. "The unit is complex."

"A facility is being built, both to manufacture and house them," Robotnik replied. He called up another screen that displayed a gigantic ship, like a floating aircraft carrier. Metal Sonic gazed at it in something like awe, then commented, "You mean business this time."

"I've always meant business," Robotnik nodded. "It is nearly complete. It will launch in two months, and you and I will be on it."

Metal Sonic turned and gazed at his master's face. "It WILL succeed this time. There is no way the Hedgehog can learn of it. What are the names of the construction facility and the raw units?"

"The flagship is called the Egg Carrier," Robotnik replied with a grand sweep of his arm, "and the units are Egg-one-hundreds. But the designs are far from complete." This seemed to remind him of his unfinished project, for he frowned at the unfinished schematics. "Dismissed, Mecha."

The robot turned away, hesitated and turned back. "Sir--"

"What is it?" Robotnik asked absently, already absorbed in his work.

"Sir, about the strange transmission ..." Mecha paused, then continued when Ivo said nothing, "I believe I know who it was. I have analyzed the term 'viceroid', and have come to the conclusion that--"

"Are you still stewing about that?" the doctor asked, annoyed at having to break his concentration. "I don't want to hear about it. It's nothing, I tell you, NOTHING!" He pounded his fist on the desk, making the papers and knick-knacks jump. He stood and glared down at the robot, who looked up at him without fear. Mecha was not cowed. Robotnik had programmed him that way--but at the moment it grated on his nerves. "If you weren't so expensive I'd kick you across the room," he growled. "Go into town and pick up some parts for me--maybe

another task will clear your circuits. And don't let me catch you thinking about the viceroid again, you understand?"

"Affirmative," Metal Sonic replied quietly. "I shall not speak of it again."

Robotnik handed him a paper with the parts written on it. Mecha scanned them, handed it back and left the building without a word.

"Master's command = do not think about viceroid. Very well, self unit will comply. Master did NOT say cease analyzing transmission. Master did NOT say to cease identifying this 'viceroid'. Therefore self unit will continue research and Master can take a flying leap."

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### Chapter 3: Spark is taken

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Sonic stood outside Sally's hut in the sun, thinking. If the mysterious beast was a robot, then Robotnik was probably responsible. It was weakening Knothole, one person at a time. His thoughts shot to Knuckles. The echidna was acquainted with most of the robot designs. He could probably tell them what they were up against and how to stop it.

No sooner had this thought crossed his mind than Sonic was jogging through Knothole toward the teleporter set up in a clearing a short distance away from it. He would get Knux to come to Knothole and help plan counter-measures ...

The teleporter was a softly colored crystal disk in a glass stand. The hedgehog stepped on it. His weight triggered it, and it began to glow beneath him. After a moment of warming up, the beam flashed on and surrounded Sonic. He closed his eyes against the brilliance. A second later he felt himself lifted--floating through nothing, yet travelling at tremendous speed--then he was re-materialized on another crystal disk. He opened his eyes and saw the familiar grassy area adjacent to a path. He had made it.

Sonic stepped onto the path and ran along it, breathing the air and looking about. The wind in his face was chilly, like early spring. Knux and the Chaotix would probably be inside where it was warm. He turned at a fork in the road and made for Chaotix Central.

There were lights on in Knuckles's hut. Sonic skidded to a halt on the doormat and knocked. After a moment Knuckles opened the door, stepped out and closed it behind him, then folded his arms, looked at the hedgehog and barked, "What?"

"Knux, Robotnik's around again." In his mind's eye, Sonic saw the holographic projection Nicole had displayed.

"Did you ever hear about the boy who cried wolf?" Knuckles asked, eyes narrowing.

This didn't register in Sonic's worried head. "We need you to come to Knothole. We're afraid something's major wrong. We could--"

"What do you mean, 'we'?"

That got through. Sonic looked at Knuckles and cocked his head to one side. "We. Us. You and me, Knux. Hey, what's up with you?" Then he bit his tongue, too late seeing the smoldering fuse in his friend's eyes.

Knuckles's fists came up in an attack position, teeth bared. "You've tormented me for weeks about it, you creep! Get out of here! I don't want to hear about your stupid problems! Get off my island!" He lunged at Sonic, grabbed him by one arm and dragged him back down the path, toward the teleporter.

Sonic was stunned. "Knux, wait a minute! What the heck are you doing, man? Why are you so mad?" He let the echidna drag him along, knowing that to struggle meant a punch in the kisser.

"Because you're gonna betray me, or have already," the echidna growled without looking back, obviously furious.

Sonic stared at him, open-mouthed. "Wha--I didn't do that! I would NEVER do that!" He searched his memory for something he might have done. "If I did anything else, I'm sorry!"

"Sorry don't cut the mustard," Knuckles snarled. Sonic realized they had already reached the teleporter--they had been traveling very fast. Knuckles threw him down on it so hard Sonic grunted in pain. Knuckles stepped into the disk with him. Sonic looked up at him beseechingly. "Knux, what happened? What did I do?"

Knuckles gave him a sneer he had not used since their battle years ago in Hidden Palace. "You aren't gonna sell me out, jerk. You ain't welcome here no more."

They were cut off as the teleporter beamed them back to the mainland. Once there, Knuckles yanked Sonic roughly to his feet and hauled him toward Knothole. Sonic let him, too shocked and hurt to do much. What had happened to his friend? This was horrible ... maybe Slasher could talk some sense into him.

They emerged from the woods a dozen feet from Sally, who approached, ready to welcome them. Knuckles cut her off by heaving Sonic at her feet. The hedgehog scrambled to his feet as Knuckles snarled, "And don't come back. None of you scum are welcome on the Floating Island any more. I'm quitting the Freedom Fighters. I don't care what happens to you, don't come crawling to me." He turned on his heel and strode away. Later it was discovered he had uprooted the teleporter and taken it back with him, cutting off all travel to and from the island.

Sonic and Sally stared after Knuckles in shock.

"What's his problem?" Sally asked at last.

Sonic shook his head and held up his hands helplessly. "I have no idea. I asked him to help us and he came unglued ... said I tried to

betray him to Robotnik. Sal ... did I?" He turned to her, pleading, confused and even a bit afraid.

Sally shook her head, as bewildered as himself. "I don't know, Sonic. I--It doesn't seem like--it just isn't LIKE Knuckles to jump to conclusions like that!" She ran a hand through her hair and gazed in the direction the echidna had gone. "I guess we're on our own."

\* \* \*

Sonic retreated to his hut often during the next few weeks, wracking his brains continuously for something he may have said to Knuckles ... anything. The only thing he could come up with was the joke he had made last time he had been to the island. Knux wouldn't take him seriously, would he?

One day he had laid there for a long time, staring vacantly at the ceiling, when he became aware of a soft hubbub outside. His curiosity getting the better of his grief, he stood and opened his door.

Then he gasped and joined the crowd in the middle of the village. Standing alone in the middle of the circle was Zephyer, the partially robotized echidna Sonic had met during his previous adventures. At first glance nothing wrong could be seen--her red head and long dreadlocks clashed with her silver body, as usual. But on closer inspection, two senses were struck with a shock--she was covered from head to toe in a thin blue slime, and she positively reeked of carrion.

She was insisting that no one touch her, but she looked ill. Sonic backed out of the crowd, looking about desperately for Slasher, stomach churning at the smell. He recognized it--oh, how he knew that smell! As he looked about, he noticed Spark in the crowd. The brothers made eye contact, and Spark nodded ever so slightly. He remembered it, too.

Slasher appeared out of nowhere, took Zephyer by one slimy hand and led her out of the crowd, shooing everyone away as she went. Spark and Sonic, however, she waved up to her. "Get two buckets full of water. We have to wash her off ASAP." The hedgehogs nodded and fled.

Zephyer was led into the shelter of the woods, and was unceremoniously doused with two buckets of water. She stood silently, teeth clenched against the cold, eyes closed. When they finished she wiped her eyes, flung back her wet hair and gasped, "Thanks. Oh, but you missed my arm--it's got the acid in it--" she gasped again and turned her right arm. Sonic, Spark and Slasher all gasped or exclaimed softly--a large gnash ran from the back of her shoulder, along the underside of her arm to her wrist. The metal was sliced as neatly as if with a can opener, and the flesh beneath was torn.

Slasher looked closely at it, then stood erect and said gravely, "You need stitches and patching. Derobotization would be the best."

"No, don't derobotize me," Zephyer panted. "If not for the weapons in my arms I'd be dead." She swayed, suddenly faint. Slasher steadied her, then picked her up. "We'd better get Zeff out to Eagle's Nest," the raptor said to the hedgehogs. "It has the best medical and

soldering equipment. Hop on." She crouched a little to let Sonic and Spark climb up on her back. The great wings unfurled on either side of them, the muscles surged, and they were airborne.

"Spark," Sonic whispered furiously in his brother's ear, "that smell! Is it what I think it is?"

The green hedgehog turned his head and hissed, "It is! That's how terbium smells!"

"I recognized it, too," Slasher commented, overhearing them. "I was covered in it rescuing you in Robotropolis, Spark."

"Yeah, when you attacked a pod," Spark replied. "Think it hurt Zeff much?"

"It's in her wound," Slasher replied, wings settling into a steady beat. "It may hurt her terribly. Zephyer, what happened?"

The echidna was cradled in the raptor's muscular arms, eyes closed and breathing through her teeth, trying to keep from crying in pain. She spoke without stirring. "The viceroid was gonna drain me, but when he grabbed me I turned on my blaster and ripped open a hemisphere. He spit me out along with fifty gallons of slime. He tried to gore me, but he missed and got my arm. I got up and ran back here."

"Viceroid?" Sonic exclaimed. "What's that?"

"The viceroid," Zephyer said without further details, as if the word were enough.

"Where did you hear the word?" Spark asked, leaning forward.

Zephyer was silent a moment, then murmured, "That's what he called himself." The fire in her wound was weakening her. "Gotta stop him somehow. He's gonna build more viceroids. Ask Knuckles to look up viceroids. My people encountered them ..." She trailed off and did not speak again until they reached Eagle's Nest.

Eagle's Nest was Knothole's backup village, hidden far back in the woods. It was built in the tops of several huge trees, joined together by wooden bridges. Contained in the central building was the prized de-robotizer, designed by Packbell himself. It was used daily, for when Robotropolis was destroyed by the unruly terbium, the robians had been led from the city by Sonic's uncle Charles. There were so many of them that they were still being de-robotized even now, a year later. A small crew lived in the secret village semi-permanently to look after the robots and run the de-robotizer.

Slasher dropped down and landed on one of the platforms, folding her wings to her sides. Sonic and Spark slid off and followed the big raptor toward the medical hut.

It took Slasher more than an hour to clean the gash beneath the metal, and even longer to sew it up. Zephyer was given a shot to put her to sleep, and so was out of pain for the duration of the operation. Sonic and Spark looked on anxiously, trying to help when



they could, but they could not do much. The wound was at such an odd angle that even Slasher couldn't do much. But at last she settled back with a sigh of relief and announced, "It's done."

Sonic and Spark walked outside and sat on the edge of the wood platform as Slasher cleaned up inside. "I wish she were awake," Sonic sighed. "I want her to tell what this 'viceroid' looked like, why it was full of terbium slime and how in the world it gored her."

"Yeah," Spark agreed blandly. He stood and stretched idly. "C'mon, I want to look around. I haven't seen this place in ages."

\* \* \*

Serena was at that moment hiking through the woods, exploring a dry creekbed. She was not thinking about viceroids or that she could be in danger. She was thinking lazily of how nice it was to be off the work shift, how warm the weather was, where the creek led and what she had packed for lunch.

Abruptly the bushes drew together in a thicket and blocked her way. No matter--she slid down the dry bank and picked her way down the bed. It was hot and dusty. Lizards zipped away at her approach, and grasshoppers sizzled into the air. The trees arched above her like cathedral walls, nearly meeting overhead in some places. The birds twittered here and there, and the woods murmured with a breeze. "I love this," she thought dreamily.

The young hedgehog paused to eat a sandwich and drink some water, then wandered on, not caring particularly where she was or how far she went.

Presently the size of the rocks increased, and the streambed sloped sharply downward. Serena climbed up on a warm boulder and gazed down it, imagining the waterfall that had flowed there at one time. The dry bed dropped down ten or fifteen feet, then faded into the shadows under a particularly thick grove of trees. The walls of the bank were high down there, and the shade was deep black. It looked like a cool place to rest before starting the hot trek back. Serena climbed down in it.

The odor hit her like a wall as she entered the shade. "Whew, something's dead," she said aloud, wrinkling her nose. Bored and idly curious, she walked further down the streambed, looking for the source of the smell. It grew stronger as she walked. The air was warm and still, as if inside a tent. After a while she came to a place where the bed opened out in a wide, once-swampy area, now overgrown with cottonwoods and willow sprouts. A perfect place for something dead to lie hidden in. She started to turn back and leave, but a glint of something drew her a little further on.

Something shiny among the weeds. She ventured near and looked. It was thick and hard, like an iron spike. She touched it curiously.

Suddenly the black spike lit up, glowing ocean-blue--a crystal. There were many more just like it, screened until now by the grass. As if that had been a signal, other indigo crystals lit like floodlights beneath the trees. They were everywhere--the reeds and willows were

full of them.

Serena stared around at them as her startled brain made the connection. That smell; those crystals! Terbium! Blue color notwithstanding, it was a terbium grove they had somehow missed! She had to get out of there!

She turned to run, but suddenly found she had no strength. For a moment she thought it was from walking in the sun, then realized it was the terbium, sucking the life, the carbon-based energy, right out of her body. And there was so much terbium--

She walked a few feet, then slowed to a stagger. Suddenly the stench was overpowering--she couldn't breathe--her legs wouldn't carry her. She dropped to her knees, gasping raggedly, the world beginning to rotate about her like a merry-go-round, the crystals glowing--

Serena slumped on her face and lay still.

\* \* \*

"Sally!"

The squirrel turned to see Tails running toward her, his eyes as big as dinnerplates. He flung his arms around her waist and hid his face in her shirt. "Tails," Sally exclaimed in surprised. "What's the matter?"

He shivered and looked up at her, then over his shoulder at the woods. "I saw that thing that got Slasher," he whispered.

Sally's arms automatically slipped around the fox's shoulders in a protective gesture. "What did it look like?"

"Like Slasher said," Tails replied tremulously, "a waterballoon. A bunch of them stuck together, with white spikes sticking out between them. It was walking that way." Tails pointed in the general direction of Eagle's Nest. "I don't think it saw me."

"How big was it?"

"Real big!" the young fox exclaimed. He let go of Sally, spun his tails and rose into the air fifteen feet. "This high," he said, then landed and scraped a line in the dirt. Fifteen feet away he scraped another line. "This big," he said. "It was round."

"Did it roll?"

"No, it walked. And it throbbed. It was really gross." Tails shivered all over. A breeze rustled the trees to their backs and the little fox jumped and grabbed Sally again in terror. "C'mon," Sally said soothingly, "let's go to the ammunition bunker and get your gun." "And mine," she added to herself.

\* \* \*

Spark went off on his own to examine the trees of Eagle's Nest from the ground, and Sonic circled back to the medical hut, where Slasher was tending Zephyr. He knocked, was told to wait a few minutes and

obeyed. Idly the blue hedgehog shifted his weight from foot to foot to make the wooden platform creak, then leaned his elbows on the railing. The leafy roof above him rustled softly in the breeze, and the platform swayed ever so slightly as the supporting branches moved. It was like being in a boat.

The door clicked open behind him and Sonic turned. Slasher stepped out and closed the door softly. "How is she?" Sonic asked.

Slasher bobbed her head hopefully. "Looks good. I was able to neutralize the acid with baking soda. She's sleeping from the anesthetic, so we might as well leave her for a while."

"She wake up, ever?"

"Once. Told me a bit about where she thought it lived and mentioned terbium."

"Where?" Sonic's eyes were alight with wary excitement.

Slasher pointed southwest. "She said it lives in the riverbottoms, you know, where it used to flow before it was diverted to flow through Robotropolis. She asked me to kill it." The raptor paused and gazed off over the treetops. "Zeff kept referring to it as a 'he'." Suddenly she looked around. "Where's Spark?"

At that moment there came a loud rustling on the ground, as if something large were moving very fast. They both rushed to the railing and looked over in time to see something red and white vanish into the cover of the trees. Somehow they knew it had Spark. Sonic leaped onto Slasher's back, and they plunged from the treetops and tore after it.

\* \* \*

Metal Sonic was polishing his hull with an old rag and a tin of car wax, when his internal radio picked up an incoming transmission. It was on a frequency that the warrior robots had used to communicate, back in Robotropolis. He froze and said through his transmitter, "Acknowledge incoming message."

The voice was the same one he had received earlier. It said, "Hello, Mecha."

"Hello, Viceroid," Metal Sonic replied calmly. "What is the purpose of this transmission?"

"To let you know I am having a grand time outwitting the foolish Freedom Fighters," the gurgling voice replied. "I have one of them now, and two more are pursuing me. They assume I am a stupid animal. They will be most shocked at what I intend to do next."

"Did you contact me to gloat?" Mecha asked, irritated, rubbing a glob of wax onto his lower arm panel.

"Not just that, my friend," the viceroid replied. "Actually, this is a dare. I dare you to come out of hiding and do me battle. You would be on Sonic's side."

Metal Sonic twitched uncontrollably at the name, and the viceroid

laughed as if he could see the robot. "I know you well, Mecha bot two," it sneered. "Come and challenge me. I promise it will be interesting. I may even let you survive if I think you deserve it."

"Yes, most interesting," Mecha replied flatly. "Do you have anything else to add?"

"No, that is all. Command--I mean, Viceroid out."

Mecha did not budge from his seat until he had completed his polishing, but his crimson eyes were flashing like a beacon. He had been challenged, and he had never yet turned a challenge down. Robotnik would not care if he left on a mission for a day or two. No, the biggest hindrance would be the Hedgehog and company ...

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#### Chapter 4: "Where's Sally?"

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Sonic crouched over Slasher's neck, eyes on the forest ahead. Slasher's feet were flying beneath them, driving them forward at a tremendous pace. Even at that, they were only slowly gaining on the monster ahead of them.

Suddenly Slasher set her feet, spun and skidded sideways, nearly pitching Sonic off. He clutched at her wings on either side to steady himself and looked around for the reason for stopping. Then he gasped.

A red shadow was just departing, and Sonic through subconsciously that it was beating like an exposed heart, but his attention was focused on the figure lying on the ground. Spark was laying on his back, breathing heavily, staring at the sky. Slasher had stopped to avoid running him over. She crouched over him. "Are you okay?" she and Sonic asked simultaneously.

The green hedgehog nodded breathlessly. "I'm fine. Boy, what a ride! It's still bleeding. I saw where Zeff shot it." He shakily climbed to his feet. His spines were rumpled, but he was unhurt. He slowly mounted behind Sonic and sighed, "Slash, can you take it easy? I'm wiped."

This was why the great velociraptor walked all the way back to Knothole. It was early evening by the time they reached it, and Spark was half-asleep, leaning with his head against Sonic's back. Sonic, too, was weary. He felt emotionally drained-- Knuckles's rejection, the chase, Zephyr--he wanted to do nothing more than go to bed and crash.

This is what he and Spark did.

Sonic did not get up until late the next morning. No sooner had he stepped out of his hut, blinking in the sunlight, than he was met by a terrified Tails. "Sonic," he gasped, huddling close to him,

"Sally's gone and Slasher saw Metal Sonic flying over the trees."

Sonic's sleepy brain was instantly on the alert. "Mecha? What's he doing here?"

"We donno," Tails replied, moving back a step and fingering the pistol that hung at his hip. "Think he might be working with the monster?"

Sonic looked around at the trees and huts hopelessly and drew a deep breath. "If he is, we're sunk," he said. "Where's Sally?"

"She's gone."

Sonic turned and stared at the fox. "Oh no ..."

"But not like that," Tails said hurriedly. "We think she went to the Floating Island to talk to Knux or something."

"Why would she do that?" Sonic asked, a deep horror slowly growing inside him. "We can check on that easily enough. C'mon, lil' bro." He tried to sound cheerful, but the strain of the past few weeks was again weighing heavily on him.

He led Tails to the community hut and turned on the long-range radio-unit. Maybe Knuckles would be over his sulk and willing to help them. This hope was dashed as the echidna's voice came on, sounding angry and sullen. "What do YOU want?"

Sonic didn't know that Knuckles was on the verge of apologizing. All the hedgehog knew was that his former friend was still against them. Trying to control himself, he asked if Knuckles had seen Sally. Knuckles replied cruelly, "No, and who cares if I have?"

Sonic attacked Knuckles verbally, snarling that Knuckles was a total jerk, always had been and always would be, and no one had ever really liked him. "And if the Floating Island is the next to go," he raged, "I won't care--I'll be glad!" With that Sonic snapped off the radio and stomped outside.

He knew where Sally was. Far too well, he knew. His anger was partially dread of what he must do and terror of the viceroid. Things had come to a head--the viceroid must be stopped.

And so, emerald belt on and ready, Sonic snuck out of Knothole to confront the monster.

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## Chapter 5: Lair of the Viceroid

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Serena lay motionless in the weeds in the creekbottoms, pale as a ghost and eyes closed. She did not know when night came or when dawn stole across the sky. She did not stir when a monstrous thing stood

over her and prodded her with a white--horn? spike?--and gave a disgusting gurgle of amusement.

She did not feel the metal hand close on her wrist and drag her deeper into the tall grass and sapling trees until she was a good thirty feet from the nearest pod. The person was none too gentle as he shoved her into a hollow under the creekbank. She did not hear the metallic grunt of disgust he gave as he walked away.

What finally awoke her was a high yell of an attacking Freedom Fighter. There was a thump of colliding flesh, then a fiery green flash and a crash of something falling into the bushes. Serena sat up and looked about.

The first thing she saw in the shadows beneath the trees was a monstrous spherical shape, three parts of it pulsing and throbbing to their own rhythm, faster or slower than the rest. The sphere was made of smaller spheres, like a cluster of gigantic grapes, each the size of a beach ball. Each sphere pulsed like a bullfrog's throat. Between each cluster, a white spike protruded, as solid as the rest was soft. It was the viceroid. It was so horrible Serena put both hands over her mouth to stifle a scream.

She did not see Sonic until he leaped out of the grass. His spines stood on end like the fur of an angry cat, and his quills glowed and flashed all the colors of the rainbow. In comparison, his non-glowing shoes and muzzle appeared dark. He had attacked and somehow been repelled. Again, he leaped into the air, spinning head over heels, ionized spines like a sawblade, but he never touched the thing. A monstrous tongue of green flame spurted from between the spheres, struck him and blasted him backward. He would have been burnt to a crisp had he not been invincible.

Sonic hit the ground on his side rather ungracefully, and scrambled at once to his feet. The viceroid was making a strange sound, almost as if it were laughing. Furious, Sonic leaped again-- and again was struck in the face by chemical flames.

Obviously a direct rush was not the way. Sonic righted himself again and circled warily, staring at the monster. It had no visible eyes, but he knew it was watching him. It made a soft squish, squish as it throbbed, then said, "It is good to meet you again, Sonic." Its voice was garbled and horrible, but understandable.

"Again?" Sonic asked, itching to do something--anything--but stand there and talk to the thing.

"Yes, again," the viceroid replied complacently. "I have not always been a Viceroid."

"What are you, a shapeshifter?"

"No." The glob moved backward several feet.

Sonic moved forward a step. "What have you done with Sally?"

Again the beast moved back, and again Sonic moved forward.

"Why do you care what happens to her?"

"She's my friend!"

"She will be returned to your village in a few days," the viceroid replied with a sickening chuckle. "She will be as unharmed as the rest." It drifted backward, into the tall grass, and Sonic followed, made bolder by its retreat.

"What are you doing to her? Are you really eating her?"

"No." The viceroid made a sideways motion, as if it were pointing. Sonic looked about and saw several terbium pods nearby, all with glowing blue crystals protruding from their tops. Their sides were speckled brown and orange, like rot on a log, and coated with mucus. They oozed and bulged a little, something like the viceroid's continuous motion. "I feed off the power created by the pods," it told the hedgehog. "Unfortunately, because of their mutation, they can only draw nutrients from life forms. I take a life form and use it to feed the terbium, which in turn feeds me."

Of course. That explained the starvation of each victim and why they craved vegetables--greens were high in carbon, the mineral the terbium drained from them.

"Mutation?" Sonic questioned. For some reason, he felt oddly light-headed.

"Yes," the viceroid gurgled. "They were nearly destroyed by the neutralization, but a few were able to adapt enough to survive. This is why they are blue instead of red. They cannot reproduce, and need protection ... which is why they grew me. I feed and protect them, and they feed me. The only catch is they require life forms ... you aren't feeling sleepy by any chance?"

The hedgehog was, but would never admit it. "Heck no!" he exclaimed. Suddenly, as he spoke, his head inflated and floated off his shoulders like a balloon. At least, that was how it felt. He staggered to the side and collapsed to his hands and knees. Only then did he realize the viceroid's scheme; lure him within range of the terbium and weaken him as it gained strength. His bewildered eyes filled with the cold glow of the terbium crystals ... then he slowly sank to the ground, too weak to fight it. As if from a distance, he heard the viceroid laugh gruesomely in triumph.

He did not hear when the monster strolled away to another part of the lair, tiring of him. He didn't hear a soft cry of, "Sonic, look out!" But he did feel the cold hands close on his wrist momentarily. They released with a jerk, and the figure standing above him cursed softly and venomously. He was immediately kicked several times in the face and stomach. Although it did not hurt, it was uncomfortable. "Get up, fool!" a malicious voice hissed. "Get up before you are killed!"

Sonic couldn't move--he had so little strength left--

"Serena!" the voice snarled hatefully, "get over here and assist your brother! I cannot touch him."

A pair of hot, sweaty hands took Sonic's wrist this time, and he was dragged several feet, put down, dragged a few more feet. The drain on his energy lessened somewhat, and he felt some of his strength

return. He lifted his head and opened his eyes. Serena was pulling at his wrist with all her strength. Where had she come from?

Sonic's eyes focused. Standing a few feet away was Metal Sonic.

Sonic yanked himself to his feet, staggered, then threw himself between the robot and his sister. "Mecha!"

The robot looked at him contemptuously, but a sound from behind them kept him from commenting. The viceroid had noticed they were removing Sonic from the terbium. Now it was charging back almost as quickly as Sonic could run. "'Rena, run!" Sonic shouted, then it was upon him.

It dealt him a blow to the torso with a horn that would have torn him in half had he not been invincible, and flung him backward. Then it blasted him repeatedly with its flames, driving him even further into the mass of pods. The effect was the same as before; Hyper Sonic's powers were sucked from him as fast as they were generated, which dimmed his glow to a sickly pea green. Sonic was no match for this. Through half-closed eyelids he watched the viceroid stalk away, almost swaggering. This time it did not go far. Sonic saw it torch something in the grass, then catch it in its spikes and fling it into the tree branches overhead. Sonic made a huge effort and gained his feet--Serena! No, she didn't have glowing red eyes. It had attacked Mecha.

The scorched robot hung across a branch, arms and legs dangling, eyes fixed on the monster. It stood below him, throbbing steadily and standing guard. Where was Serena? Sonic couldn't see her, but then he couldn't see past the tall pods to his left and right, anyway. He swayed slightly. What if he deactivated his belt? Could he escape? Probably not--he remembered the sick weakness that the pods created. He couldn't walk out or the viceroid would pounce on him. His searching gaze settled on Mecha again, who had drawn himself up and was sitting precariously on the branch, glaring with hatred at the monster below him. He muttered something Sonic couldn't catch, and the viceroid laughed hideously. The robot lifted his head and stared thornily at Sonic. They were in the same boat.

A faint idea came to the hedgehog. Sonic held a hand to his face and pretended to talk into a radio, then pointed in the direction of Knothole. Metal Sonic stared at him for a long moment, then nodded his head slightly.

Hyper Sonic directed his attention to the terbium pods about him. Blue terbium. It couldn't reproduce. If they killed the terbium somehow, then the viceroid would starve to death. Perhaps quickly, perhaps not so quickly ... and the monster was malicious enough to attack the village and level it before it died. They must kill it quickly, and at a long distance from Knothole. But ... how?

Sonic reached into a pod, gripped a crystal with one hand and squeezed his belt with the other. The energy output of the emeralds grew, pouring his energy straight into the pod. After several minutes, Sonic realized the futility of this. All he had succeeded in doing was brightening the glow of the crystals in the pods around him. It might take days to overfeed them, and then they would simply feed their excess to the viceroid. He let go and slumped to the



ground hopelessly.

Perhaps fifteen minutes later, a change came when the viceroid slipped away from beneath Mecha and blended into the shadows among the brush and pods. Mecha watched it, then dropped from the branch stealthily and slipped through the pods toward Sonic. Sonic watched him warily, but was not afraid--Mecha would not touch him while he was hyper. The robot moved up near him, then crouched between the pods to keep the viceroid from seeing him. "I have radioed your companions," the robot said at one-fourth volume. "Slasher said she is coming and knows how to destroy him."

Sonic nodded. "Yeah, cool. Lets see her get close to it."

"You have no faith in your companions?"

"Do you?"

"No. I have seen you in your most powerful state reduced to lying where the commander threw you. You are talking with me fearlessly. You have shown yourself an unworthy opponent of the commander, and so are an unworthy rival for myself."

Sonic sat up, eyes darkening. "Hey! Are you calling me a wimp?"

The robot stared at Sonic for a moment, then said, "Yes."

The enraged hedgehog made a move to grab Metal Sonic by the neck, but the robot slapped his hands away spitefully. "Do not try anything foolish, fool. You are weaker than I am at the moment."

Sonic's dander was up, and his anger gave him strength. He didn't know it, but that had been Mecha's intent. He leaped to his feet, spines so erect they bent backward.

The robot stood as well. "At last, rival, you have shown some vertebrae."

"Backbone," Sonic growled. "I'm gonna punch your sorry head--"

Mecha held up a hand. "Do not exert your strength on me. Save it for the commander."

For the first time Sonic heard the robot speak the title. "Commander?"

"Yes, fool," Metal Sonic said with exaggerated patience. "The viceroid used to be Commander Packbell. The terbium absorbed his programming and melded it into the viceroid as it died."

Sonic's anger drained away into a pool of horror. "That ... THING ... is Packbell?"

"Yes. He has challenged me to a battle. He also wanted to demonstrate his superiority over common organisms, which he has." Mecha looked Sonic over from head to toe scornfully. Sonic glared back at him. "What about you? He torched you pretty good."

"Ah, but I am not out yet. I am awaiting reinforcements from your

village. The dinosaur earned my respect for brainpower long ago, and I am interested in seeing what she has planned." Mecha turned and gazed off toward the edge of the trees, through which sunlight was visible. "Ah, here she is now."

Slasher did not appear at once, outlined by the light, as Sonic thought she would. She instead entered the thicket from the side, head and tail low, slinking through the brush like a cat. She paused a short distance away and looked about for a long moment, taking in Hyper Sonic and Metal Sonic in the blue terbium, Serena huddled in a hollow behind a screen of rhododendron, and the dense shade of black in the depths of the shadows she knew was probably the viceroid.

To Sonic and Mecha's surprise, she reared up and called, "Hello, I'm here! Come and get me!"

The viceroid did not move.

Neither, for a while, did Slasher. She stood in plain sight, head turning from side to side, nostrils working, obviously deep in thought. "Sonic, are you all right?"

"Sorta, Slash." Sonic briefed her on why he was in the terbium and why he couldn't leave. He said nothing on Mecha's account, as he didn't know why the robot was staying so near him, or what his plans were.

The velociraptor took in the information and saw at once that the viceroid's only weakness was the terbium that gave it life. It had defeated Hyper Sonic. She had better be careful--it could cause serious injury to the incautious.

"Yo, viceroid!" she called. "I have here something you might want." She held up a hand, and something bright blue flashed in the dimness. Sonic and Mecha both recognized it with sudden, silent apprehension--the blue chaos emerald. There was a good chance the viceroid recognized it, too, but it gave no sign.

"I will exchange the emerald for your prisoner," Slasher continued. "I will put it down here. If you come out and hand over the prisoner, you may have it." She did so and stepped back several paces from the stone.

Absolute silence ruled for an eternal space of time as the monster considered the proposal. Sonic's eyes darted from the black patch, to Slasher and back again as sweat broke out on his forehead. If Slasher gave it the emerald, it would overload the pods, all right, but the viceroid wouldn't die very quickly. In fact, it might be the terbium equivalent of a sugar rush.

The viceroid moved out into the lesser shadows near the imprisoned hedgehog, the light revealing its hideous appearance. "I accept," it gurgled. It gave an extra ripple of its spheres, and a body rolled to the ground from between them.

Here things began to move very fast. Slasher snatched up Sally in one hand and the emerald in the other, before the viceroid could pick it up. Sonic leaped from the terbium grove, his glow returning with a rush. He took Sally from Slasher's arms and sprang out of the tainted riverbottoms, headed for home. The viceroid ran at Slasher with a

choked bellow, but she sidestepped and hurled the sparkling chaos emerald through the air. Metal Sonic caught it neatly in his cupped hands. The viceroid whirled on him. "Run for it!" Slasher yelled. The robot obeyed.

Mecha's light frame and jet engines paid off--he cleared the edge of the ravine and was away into the outer forest before the viceroid could flame him. But unfortunately, the emerald in his fist was not compatible with machines and poured its power into his hull in a series of electric shocks. His speed dropped to a stumbling walk.

Slasher appeared out of nowhere. He thrust the gem into her hands unwillingly--he had once harnessed its power, and even in its raw form, he found himself craving it. "Come with me!" she commanded, darting to the right. Mecha ignited his jets again and followed her.

The viceroid was pursuing them without a sound except the rustle of brush as it passed. It was furious and would kill them if it could.

"Not too fast," Slasher warned. "We don't want to lose him."

"Why not?" Metal Sonic asked. "Why not turn and fight?"

"Trust me," the big raptor said, tossing a glance over her shoulder. "Now ... stop!"

She grabbed the robot's arm and dragged them both to a halt. The large viceroid shot by them, too massive to stop quickly. "Here!" Slasher yelled, and threw the emerald at it as hard as she could. It smacked into the crimson flank, making the hide ripple. A sphere stretched, covered the emerald, and slurped it into its interior like a marble into a vacuum cleaner.

The viceroid stood still for a moment, except for the throbbing of its spheres. Then it said quietly, almost to itself, "Mecha first, then the raptor."

"Run," Slasher commanded the robot.

The two fled into the woods, the viceroid again in hot pursuit. "What are you DOING?" Metal Sonic said to his companion, who was still towing him by the arm. "He will kill us now!"

"Don't worry," Slasher replied. "How much fuel do you have?"

"Enough for several days."

"Good. We may be running for that long."

"WHAT?"

\* \* \*

Hyper Sonic soared just above the trees, heart racing in his chest. He had taken Sally back to Knothole, stuck around long enough to hear that she was in critical condition but would probably live, returned

to the riverbottoms for Serena, raced her back to the village, and was now out for the third time, looking for Slasher.

He didn't know whether he was angry or afraid. Perhaps a fizzily mixture of both. Sally was nearly dead, and he had been humiliated in front of his enemy! The latter stung sharply--to have Mecha's hatred was to be expected, but for him to hate and look down on Sonic at the same time was too much. He would show him-- he'd kill that viceroid--he'd avenge Sally and protect Knothole from the menace of the monster.

A flash of color through the brush below, a sound of Mecha's jet engines. Sonic dropped, looking, looking. Slasher and Mecha running, the viceroid about thirty feet behind and slowly gaining. Sonic dropped to the ground and pulled up beside Slasher. "He's gaining," the glowing hedgehog announced to the raptor and robot. "Slash, why aren't you flying? And why are you helping Mecha run?"

"Because I'd lose him, to both questions," Slasher replied. "Nice of you to drop in."

Mecha cast a red glance at Sonic and said nothing.

"Well, what's the plan?" Sonic persisted, glancing back at the oncoming viceroid.

Slasher stepped up the pace and dodged to the left, lengthening the distance between herself and her pursuer. "Ever seen what happens to a rhinoceros when they run too much? They drop dead of a heart attack."

"I don't think it has a heart, Slash."

"Duh, Sonic. The point is, we're going to run the viceroid into the ground, far away from his precious terbium. Then, when he's weak ..."

"We terminate him," Metal Sonic finished for her.

"How long can you run?" Sonic asked with a glance at the raptor's flying feet.

"A while," Slasher said arily. "Care to join in?"

The sun climbed into the sky, crossed the zenith and began its descent into the west, and still the four ran. Mecha flew alongside Slasher, knowing she had some plan and wanting to help. Sonic flew on her other side, fully able to leave at any moment and unwilling to do so, for it would leave his friend between a vicious viceroid and a vicious robot.

But as the sun neared the horizon, the raptor's tireless gate began to falter, hyper Sonic slowed, and even Mecha's engines rose toward overheating. And still the viceroid came on, unwavering, determined. It had to end sometime.

Slasher knew it well. The viceroid had to be feeling the pace just a little, if the three of them were tiring as they were. Time for the next stage of the plan. "Mecha," the raptor panted, "break right. We'll see if he remembers who he's chasing, and if he's feeling this

at all."

"Affirmative," the robot replied, and obeyed promptly. The viceroid immediately turned aside to follow him.

"Single-minded," Slasher observed. "C'mon, Sonic." She turned in a wide circle that would intersect the robot's course. Sonic followed her wordlessly, sick of the whole thing.

Yes, the monster had slowed. Mecha swept it with a scan and saw that its energy level was at 1/4th and dropping. Slasher had been right--it was too heavy for such a chase and rapidly exhausting itself. If the robot could have grinned he would have--she had planned correctly. "You're outmatched, commander," Mecha muttered.

"All right," Slasher said as they neared Mecha's course from the side. "Sonic, go on by and have Mecha follow you. I'm gonna give our friend a little surprise."

Sonic swept by Mecha and beckoned. The robot, seeing Slasher on his radar and guessing at what she intended to do, turned and followed the hedgehog. The viceroid followed Mecha, and Slasher ploughed into the viceroid from behind.

The robot and hedgehog heard the raptor's attack scream, and doubled back at once to join in. The viceroid, caught unawares, was now minus four energy-storing spheres, which were popped like water balloons and lying flat. It ripped at Slasher with its horns, but the raptor leaped out of reach and was dancing about tauntingly, daring the monster to attack her. "Get him!" she yelled to the oncoming warriors.

Sonic and Mecha scored several hits each, and the viceroid lost almost half its spheres. It saved itself from certain death by scorching the two and several nearby trees with savage bursts of chemical fire. It charged at Slasher, intending to give her the same treatment, but she turned tail and ran again. Sonic and Mecha looked at each other and gave chase.

The viceroid was badly wounded and needed to return to its life-giving terbium field to repair itself. It was so angry at Slasher, however, that it vowed to kill her before it did so. It was a fatal mistake.

"Fall back, hedgehog," Mecha said to Sonic. "This is my fight now." He surged ahead of his rival, noting with scorn that Sonic obeyed him. A good rival should never obey the other. He dove toward the viceroid and extended both hands. He had built a prototype weapon into the backs of his hands--a sort of laser cannon. When he put his hands together, he could fire a concentrated particle beam, much like the giant-sized ones Robotnik was always tinkering with. Mecha had only fired this particular gun once before, and had never charged it all the way. He drew a bead on the viceroid's center, placed his fists together and activated the energy cannon.

The yellow beam struck the viceroid exactly where the robot had intended. The monster came to a shuddering halt and whirled. Calmly Mecha aimed his weapon into its midsection again and began charging. The viceroid shot a burst of fire at him, but it fell short. The

viceroïd was weakening.

Charging complete. Mecha fired.

The blast hurled the robot backward into a tree trunk. He fell to the ground with a metallic clunk and lay still, stunned, both arms smoking.

The viceroïd also hurled backward. It bounced and rolled to a halt, where it lay absolutely still, even the throbbing gone. Sonic, hovering fifteen feet above the scene, saw the gaping hole blasted in its side and the blue fluid oozing out. "We did it!" he yelled, punching a fist into the air. "Slash, Mecha, it's dead!"

Slasher slunk back toward Sonic and the robot, giving the motionless monster a wide berth. "What happened to Mecha? Hey, Mecha, are you okay?"

The blue robot sat up, shook his head and announced, "Particle cannon too strong. Prototype failure." He stood, black smoke pouring from his hands. He looked at Sonic and Slasher and said, "The viceroïd is defeated. We are enemies once more. But, because of the aid you have given me, I will forget the location of your village ... just this once." He glared at the two. "And you will forget this incident ever occurred."

Sonic and Slasher looked at each other, then Slasher nodded. "Affirmative. None of this ever happened."

Still staring at the two, Mecha fired up his engines, rose into the air, and shot into the late afternoon sky. The Freedom Fighters watched him go. "He's an odd one," Slasher commented. "He won't tell his boss where he was, and we won't tell his boss that he was here. But he's free to try to kill us next time he sees us." She shook her head and looked toward the motionless heap of slime that had been the viceroïd. "All's well that ends well, I guess."

"Sure," Sonic said, dropping to the ground and decharging himself. "But ..." He looked toward the viceroïd. "For being such a bad dude, he sure died easy." He gave a shrug and walked toward it. "I wonder what it did with the emerald."

"Be careful, Sonic," Slasher said, moving slowly after him. "A bee will sting even after it's dead."

Sonic stood before the pile of junk and was surprised to see the metal framework beneath the outer hull of soft membrane. "Huh, it's biomechanical." He picked up a stick and poked at the thing's side ...

...and was dealt a savage blow that knocked him down.

Slasher was there at once to snatch him out of the way. The viceroïd was alive yet, throbbing out of rhythm and rolling onto its hard feet-spheres. "You will die for this," it bubbled, its voice clearer without the layer of liquid. It lurched forward menacingly. Slasher stood her ground and snarled, head low. "Try it, scum."

She leaped sideways and back as the viceroïd spat a sheet of flame at her, scorching the ground and grass. She set Sonic down and

whispered, "Keep moving."

"What's the plan?" he replied.

"I'm working on it. Now move!"

The two danced around the shrunken ball of goo as it fired bursts of deadly fire at them. Slasher's brain was running in high gear. They couldn't get near it, and direct blows didn't seem to effect it much. The only thing that had hurt it so far was Mecha Sonic's laser cannon, but the robot was gone.

"Sonic!" the raptor hollered, "we need some guns!"

"I can get us a few rifles!" the hedgehog called back.

"Good! I'll hold him! Be back here inside five minutes!"

"You got it!" The hedgehog streaked away through the woods and was gone, leaving the big raptor with the viceroid.

"You should have been dead by now," Slasher said through her teeth.

"I have reserve energy storage," the viceroid snarled.

Slasher ran a little ways, then doubled back and around. The viceroid pursued her relentlessly. The sun was sinking behind the trees in the west--they would soon lose the daylight. This was not good.

The monster paused for a second, throbbing laboriously, as if catching its breath. Slasher, too, stopped, and looked about. Sonic should be in the village by now. Another two minutes and he would be back.

She looked toward the viceroid again, only to catch a horn in the wing that threw her down. Unexpected! She struggled to regain her feet, but the monster had her pinned neatly between two horns, like an olive between the tines of a fork. She thrashed and kicked the viceroid's flank, but her claws merely filled with the exposed mucus and did no harm. The great and wise Slasher, taken by a mutant robotic fiend!

"And now," it gurgled, "you shall die." It turned the small flame-cannon barrel in her face.

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Chapter 6 The end or the beginning?

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"So there I was, smashed against the ground, wings pinned to my sides, unable to defend myself," Slasher said. She was reclining on the sofa in the community hut, covering most of it with her length. A bandage was wrapped around the upper half of her left wing. Sonic and

company sat around her on the floor, in chairs, any place they could find, listening raptly. It was a few hours after the incident.

"What'd you do?" Tails murmured.

Slasher shook her head. "I thought I was a goner. He was all set to torch me with that flame-thrower of his ... when all of a sudden there was a flash. I thought he had fired and missed somehow, but then he let me go and fell backward. I stood up and put a bit of distance between myself and him, then took the time to see what had happened.

"I was just in time to see Metal Sonic fly overhead, both arms outstretched. He was shooting that same giant laser he had before, just as fast as it would go. Almost every shot hit the viceroid. It was trying to get away, sort of crawling, but each blast weakened it a little more."

"Was Mecha saying anything?" someone wanted to know.

"Nothing I'd repeat in mixed company," the raptor grinned. "I guess it overheated the viceroid's machinery, because suddenly it just blew up. I took cover behind a tree--I donno what Mecha did, but he didn't get hit by debris. Anyway, when stuff had stopped falling, I looked around. The viceroid had become a crater and an assortment of parts and slime, most of which is now scattered over a fifty-foot area. I walked out and found the chaos emerald, scoured clean by the blast, laying off all by itself.

"I looked around for Mecha. He was still there, watching me. I saluted him. He looked at me for a long time, then said, 'I have a message for my rival. Tell him to watch the southern cities and the Floating Island very carefully in the coming months.' Then he revved up and flew away." Slasher looked at Sonic. "That's what he told me to tell you."

Sonic looked around with an odd look on his face. "I show up, armed to the teeth, and the viceroid's all blown up, and Slash is cool as an iceberg in Alaska. I couldn't believe it! She wouldn't tell me what happened, either." He scowled at Slasher good-naturedly.

She shrugged her wings. "Had to keep you in suspense."

"What made Mecha come back and save you?" Spark asked from a corner.

"I donno," Slasher replied. "I assume he saw the viceroid power up on his radar. His fight wasn't over." She paused, then added, "At least we got Sally back."

Everyone looked over at the overstuffed armchair, where Sally sat wrapped in a blanket. She was terribly weak and thin, but smiled bravely. She was going to be all right.

\* \* \*

"Mecha," Robotnik said. He had met the robot at the door. "Where have you been? Come inside, quickly. I must show you something." If the doctor noticed that Mecha's arms were blackened to the elbow, he



didn't show it. Metal Sonic followed him across the room, falling into the role of sidekick once again. But his slight resentment was banished by what Robotnik showed him.

It was an old carving depicting a sea monster attacking a city. "This," Robotnik said, pointing with a gloved finger, "is my key to ruling Mobius. This creature is made of water and feeds off the power of the chaos emeralds. If I can control it as the legends say ..." he trailed off, but Mecha understood the excitement in his master's tone. "What is the beast's name?" he asked.

"Perfect Chaos," was the reply.

The end ... for now.

End  
file.